

Cover Cover Story



What's so bad about doing the right thing?

If we did our part to slow climate change, maybe Georgia would become a nicer place to live.

By Thomas Wheatley

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If you're looking for the culprit in Georgia's global warming drama, look no further than carbon dioxide.

The bad news: Carbon dioxide emissions keep rising. According to Oak Ridge National Lab, emissions in Georgia have increased 315 percent since 1960, stemming mostly from the burning of coal and from keeping our cars and trucks moving.

The good news: They don't have to. In most cases, the steps Georgia would take to actually combat global warming are similar to steps that could help make our communities healthier, friendlier and more stable places to live.

Here's how we can act:

In the home

Some of the easiest cuts in carbon can be made at home. According to the U.S. Energy Department, if every American household installed one compact fluorescent light bulb – which is a tad more expensive than the traditional incandescent type, but lasts six to 10 times longer – it could reduce the equivalent of greenhouse gases from 800,000 cars.

Building energy-efficient houses can reduce greenhouse gases even more. Since 1999, more than 4,000 homes in Georgia and five other Southeastern states have been Earthcraft-certified, meaning they rely on such green techniques as better insulation and more efficient appliances. The Southface Energy Institute, which developed the program along with Atlanta home builders, claims those homes have prevented 64,000 tons of CO₂ from floating into the atmosphere.

Home builders and homeowners have taken to Earthcraft because it makes economic sense: Homes with lower energy bills tend to be better built and to be more comfortable. But more aggressive steps, such as solar or geothermal energy systems, are more popular in states that offer tax breaks or utility rebates for doing the right thing. Take Gainesville, Fla. The power company there offers homeowners up to \$7,500 in rebates for installing solar electric panels.

Southface's Dennis Creech says Georgia's demand for energy-efficient homes pales in comparison to that of Texas, a state that last year boasted 30,000 "Energy Star"-certified homes. Homeowners there can get tax credits for installing such green-energy devices as solar panels.

"People a lot of times think, 'Oh, it's just a house, what about those skyscrapers?'" Creech says. "But there are a lot more homes than skyscrapers. The first step is to stop building inefficient homes that waste energy and money."

For more information: Southface (www.southface.org), Energy STAR (www.energystar.gov), U.S. Green Building Council (www.usgbc.org)

On the move

Sometime after World War II, Atlanta shook its railroad roots and adopted the automobile as its mascot. Oops.

When it comes to greenhouse gases, buses, trains and other forms of transit are dramatically more efficient at getting people where they want to go – simply switching to transit could reduce a person's annual carbon emissions by 4,800 pounds a year, the American Public Transit Association says.

One way to cut carbon emissions from cars is to get people to drive more efficient vehicles. State and local

governments could help build a market for cleaner vehicles by following the example of Atlanta-based United Parcel Service: The shipping giant plans to cut carbon-dioxide emissions by 40 percent by shifting to alternative technologies. What if the state helped local school boards gradually convert their 13,140 diesel-gulping buses to hybrids?

Georgia has taken one step to help drivers switch to less polluting automobiles: Individuals can get tax credits to buy zero- and "low"-emission vehicles, but efforts to expand that credit to hybrid vehicles haven't succeeded yet.

The biggest carbon savings are likely to come from people getting out of their cars. MARTA – the largest transit agency in the country not to receive state funding – claims to keep 185,000 vehicles off the road every day. Imagine how much more *mass* mass transit could get if it was able to expand with state money.

While new transit projects, including the Beltline and a proposed trolley along Peachtree, are starting to get traction, such ideas could move quicker to reality with the kind of modest state support light-rail projects have received in cities such as San Diego and Portland.

The same goes for commuter rail. A proposed network that's languished in the state Capitol for two decades would give long-distance commuters a more efficient, and pleasant, way to get to work. An analysis conducted by the state Department of Transportation says just one of the commuter lines – the "Brain Train" from Athens to Atlanta – would immediately cut the number of miles traveled by automobiles each year by 42.5 million.

There's a bonus in all this for our quality of life: Rail could help transform metro neighborhoods into the kinds of places most people say they want to live – places that are as friendly to people as they are to cars. Compact communities that mix homes, shops and offices encourage people to walk and ride their bikes, to drive shorter distances, and to use buses and trains.

According to a report by Smart Growth America, if 60 percent of future development was geared toward foot-friendly layouts, 85 million tons of CO₂ could be kept from entering the atmosphere in the United States every year. Compact development also takes up less space, so it leaves more territory for parks and trees, and trees help to reduce greenhouse gases by storing carbon.

Many Atlanta neighborhoods and suburbs actually have been moving in that direction – mainly because our traffic and air-quality problems make such New Urbanism a good bet for developers. They've been helped along by the Atlanta Regional Commission's Livable Communities Initiative, which uses a fraction of transportation funds to help communities design walkable neighborhoods and town centers. The idea of LCI is that fewer car trips reduces the demand for more roads.

"What underlies the concept is making more efficient use of what we already have rather than expanding our footprint," says Tom Weyandt, ARC's comprehensive planning director. "You can have these little changes that can make a fairly big impact while still maintaining a suburban lifestyle."

When it comes to intercity travel, airlines are taking some early steps to reduce their carbon footprint. Delta plans to start using an electric-powered runway taxiing system, for example. But, again, it's hard to beat trains: The Center for Clean Air Policy projects that linking Jacksonville, Savannah, Greenville and Atlanta with a high-speed rail line – and giving travelers between those cities an option besides cars and air – could reduce carbon-dioxide emissions for the region by 574 million pounds each year.

For more information: *Citizens for Progressive Transit* (www.cfpt.org), *Smart Growth America* (www.smartgrowthamerica.org)

On the grid

Georgia Power's coal-fired plants are easily the state's top carbon producers. In fact, the electric utility runs two of the country's top 10 biggest greenhouse-gas-producing power plants – Plant Scherer and Plant Bowen. The Center for Global Development says Scherer, just outside Macon, belched out more carbon dioxide last year than did the entire power sector of Brazil. And Georgia Power's parent, the Southern Co., last month was ranked the nation's No. 1 corporate greenhouse emitter.

If it weren't for the investment, coal plants might be considered yesterday's technology. "From an industrial standpoint, they're dinosaurs," says Frank O'Donnell, director of Clean Air Watch, an environmental group. "Once they're paid off, they simply become cash cows. That's great for the company, but not so good for the environment."

Of the greenie alternatives, wind power – generated by huge turbines off the coast – seems to hold the most promise in Georgia. A recent Georgia Tech study found that although such a project is currently more expensive than other energy sources, it determined that wind power along the coast is strong enough to make it one day viable.

Then there's nuclear power. Despite all the questions about terrorism, waste disposal and other risks, nuclear plants can produce huge amounts of electricity while emitting virtually no greenhouse gases. On the other hand, they gobble up far more water than coal plants do: Georgia Power's Plant Vogtle already is the largest single water user in the state. With water only expected to become scarcer over the next couple of decades, it's hard to imagine the state having enough H₂O for more nuclear plants.

The often-overlooked energy strategy is conservation. The average American uses nearly double the amount of electricity of his French counterpart, and the average person living in the Southeast uses more than the average American does.

The state Public Service Commission could help by adopting a scheme called demand-side management – allowing the power company to raise its rates if it spends money on conservation instead of new power plants. With an incentive of its own, the utility ends up doing things like offering customers rebates for insulating buildings or for buying more efficient appliances.

California regulators require Pacific Gas and Electric to use such a method. The utility offers homeowners a variety of incentives to reduce their energy use, including a \$600 rebate if consumers insulate their ducts. The company estimates that the reduced demand has helped keep 125 million tons of CO₂ out of the air over the past 30 years.

California is among many states that have invested heavily in renewable-energy research and projects, including wind farms and large-scale solar facilities. While skeptics sometimes argue that reversing course on climate change is an insurmountable problem, California has set a goal to reduce its carbon emissions to 1990 levels by 2020 even while the state grows in population.

"We've got to make it where utilities have to be part of the solution and not just sell energy," says Southface's Creech. "And we have to make it profitable for them. So we have to change the rules of the game altogether."

For more information: *Southern Alliance for Clean Energy* (www.cleanenergy.org)

From the farm

The rising movement for locally grown, organic food addresses a global-warming issue that, until recently, went unnoticed. But it turns out that food production and transportation dishes out an increasingly large portion of greenhouse gases.

The University of Oregon's Institute for a Sustainable Environment estimates agriculture is associated with two tons of carbon dioxide per person every year. Add food processing and transportation emissions into that equation, and you begin to see why the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change places food's contribution to global warming at 20 percent.

Part of the problem is intense, industrial food-production methods. More energy is used to create synthetic fertilizers than to till, cultivate and harvest all the crops in the United States. Other states, including North Carolina and Mississippi, have more aggressively tapped into federal programs to help farms turn to renewable energy. Meanwhile, Georgia recently stopped funding its No-Tillage Assistance Program, which provided farmers with grants to lease or purchase less fuel-intensive equipment to tend their crops.

Metro Atlanta's been a relative latecomer to the locally grown food movement. Advocates – among them, the city's top chefs – say food is inevitably fresher when it comes from nearby farms. And if it doesn't have to travel as far, it takes less energy to get from the farm to the table. One institution that's taken a lead with locally grown food is Emory University, which last year vowed that by 2015, 75 percent of its on-campus food would come from nearby sources.

Another hopeful trend: More than 20 farmers' markets – which carry local farmers' produce, much of it organically grown – have sprung up around the region, according to Georgia Organics.

"To reduce our carbon footprint with farms and food, here are the main themes," Alice Rolls, executive director of

Georgia Organics, writes in an e-mail. "Grow your own, eat local and sustainably grown food, eat less-processed food, and eat seasonally."

For more information: [Georgia Organics \(www.georgiaorganics.org\)](http://www.georgiaorganics.org), [Sustainable Table \(www.sustainabletable.org\)](http://www.sustainabletable.org)

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